Objectives

after completing this lesson, YOU will be able to

» Understand what constitutes **political corruption;**

» Understand what constitutes *police corruption;* and

» Discuss *structural opportunities for police corruption.*

For this lesson, please read:
» Rosoff, Pontell and Tillman, *White-collar Crime*:

- **Chapter 10. Corruption of Public Officials**

Throughout American history, **the misuse of public authority for private gain** has been a persistent problem. Officials in various branches of government have breached the public interest and violated the public trust.

We can generally explain corruption through examining the interaction between individuals and the social structure in which they are located. It has been attributed to a number of factors, including ambivalence to behavioral norms, wealthy elites who are denied direct access to political policy, and intrinsic flaws in bureaucracies and organizational arrangements.

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*In the most basic sense, corruption occurs when official behavior **"deviates from the formal duties of a public role"** for some personal gain. This definition distinguishes illegal acts that are not necessarily corrupt (a politician soliciting prostitutes, for example), and corrupt acts that are not necessarily illegal (a politician putting a mistress on the government payroll).*
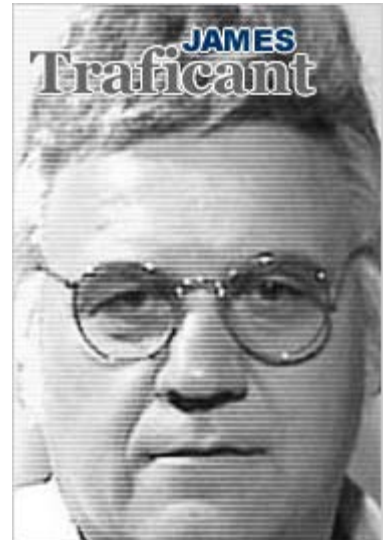
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Corruption has found its way into all branches of government, including the Executive Branch, various federal departments, the Legislative Branch, the Judiciary, state and local governments, and local police agencies.

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One corrupt official who recently made news was former Ohio congressman James Traficant, who was convicted on numerous counts related to bribery. His trial was a circus, as he chose to represent himself. His defiant and boisterous style gained him little support in the end.
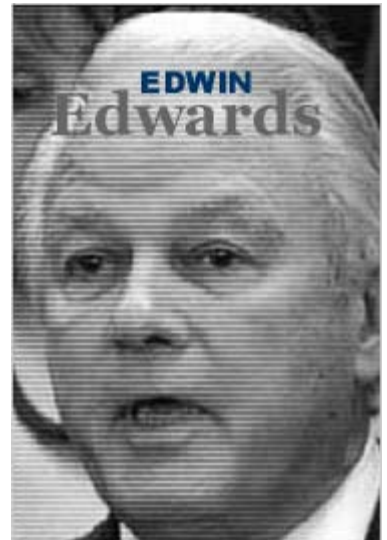
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Edwin Edwards, ex-governor of Louisiana is another prominent former public servant who got caught with his hand in the till. **Edwards**, who extorted hundreds of thousands of dollars from wealthy businessmen seeking licenses to operate riverboat casinos in the state, was sentenced to serve time on extortion and racketeering charges.

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As we'll see in this lesson, Traficant and Edwards are not alone.

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Operation ABSCAM

» One of the most incredible stories of political corruption involved the government sting **operation ABSCAM**. In this sting, many politicians were caught on video cameras taking bribes from federal agents posing as wealthy Arab businessmen.

» With the help of a convicted con artist, the **FBI** set up a congressional sting operation that produced one of the biggest embarrassments in legislative history. One after another, politicians eagerly went for the bait — and millions of stunned citizens watched them do it on the evening news.

* This case highlighted the ease with which politicians could be corrupted, and their willingness to engage in criminal acts. Moreover, the politicians' responses after they were caught provides an excellent case study in rationalizations used by prominent *white-collar criminals.*

After reading the case study on **Operation ABSCAM**, what major elements strike you as the most salient? What might be done to prevent such widespread abuses in the future, and why do you feel this would work?

Police Corruption

» Police corruption shares some similarities with political corruption, but there are also important differences. The police are not elected officials, and hence do not sell favors such as government contracts to other white-collar criminals. Law enforcement personnel do have something valuable to sell, however: immunity from the law.

» Police corruption also involves personal gain, which distinguishes it from other forms of misconduct on the job (such as organizational violations, brutality, and so on).

The movie Serpico, starring Al Pacino, is based on a true story involving the New York City Police Department. It brought the problem of police corruption to public attention in a major way — especially as it involved organizational deviance, and not just "bad cops."

» But police corruption is not limited to New York City. Virtually every major US city has **"discovered"** major police corruption in its midst, and cases have also sprung up in many smaller cities and municipalities.

Barker and Roebuck have identified a number of categories of police corruption. *These six stand out:*

1 **Corruption of authority**: This category encompasses a wide variety of material inducements.

2 **Kickbacks**: Officers receive money and/or goods for referring business to various companies.

3 **Shakedowns**: Officers receive payments in return for not making an arrest.

4 **The fix**: Personnel arrange for traffic or criminal cases to be disposed for a fee, also known as "selling a case."

5 **Opportunistic theft**: Money is stolen from arrestees, or from unconscious or dead accident victims.

6 **Protection of illegal activities**: Usually involves so-called "victimless crimes," where persons engaging in illegal activities pay police protection money that guarantees their noninterference.

As you might imagine, there are many structural opportunities for the police to get into trouble. **They have very close contact with numerous illicit activities, many of which are quite lucrative.**

. . .

Enhancing this opportunity structure is what is known as the *"Blue Wall of Silence,"* a cultural norm among officers that proscribes informing on corrupt colleagues. One police commander has compared it to omerta, the Mafia's code of secrecy: *"It is a fact of life that telling on an officer is viewed as a betrayal worse than corruption itself."*

» Inadequate internal controls enhance the structural opportunities for police corruption. **_Lawrence Sherman's_** classic study of police corruption, *Scandal and Reform,* convincingly demonstrates that entire police departments can be corrupt — not just simply a few cops.

» By reducing the problem to a **_"few bad apples,"_** larger structural and organizational relationships can remain untouched, providing yet another layer of protection for corrupt officers.

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Weeding out a few bad cops does nothing to change the organizational elements that helped produce them. **Studies have shown that policing is a highly stressful occupation that can affect the personalities and behaviors of officers**. Ignoring such features in responding to corruption serves neither the interests of the police nor society.

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Briefly discuss (in about two paragraphs) the case study of the New York City police and the Mollen Commission. What produces the *"willful blindness"* to corruption, and what can be done to deal with it? After posting your response, read those of others.

Summary
a brief overview of what you learned

» Throughout American history, the misuse of public authority for private gain has been a persistent problem. Officials in various branches of government have breached the public interest and violated the public trust. In the most basic sense, corruption occurs when official behavior **"deviates from the formal duties of a public role" for some personal gain.**

» One of the most incredible stories of political corruption involved the government sting operation **ABSCAM**. This case highlighted the ease with which politicians could be corrupted, and their willingness to engage in criminal acts.

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